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Title: Program recognized for innovation - Ash Institute selects it as finalist for \$100,000 grant

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The Kentucky Agricultural Development Fund, which was created to help farmers become less dependent on income from tobacco production, has been named one of the top 50 innovative government programs in the nation by Harvard University.

The Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government selected the Kentucky program from a field of about 1,000. Every year, the Ash Institute selects city, state and federal programs that take novel approaches to solving problems for recognition.

The top seven government programs will receive \$100,000 grants in September. Panelists from the Ash Institute will narrow the field to 18 finalists on May 2.

"It's quite an honor," said Keith Rogers, executive director of the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy, which administers the fund. "Really and truly, the honor goes to those agriculture leaders and legislators who fought the battle and created House Bill 611."

House Bill 611, which was passed by the General Assembly in 2000, established the Agricultural Development Fund with a portion of money given to the state by tobacco companies to settle smoking-related lawsuits. Since then, the fund has been used to help farmers get into new areas of agriculture, such as meat goat production, and to assist farmers who want to improve existing operations.

Millions of dollars have been pumped into farmers' cattle operations, and money from the fund was used to help farmers begin commercial vegetable production. Not all of the farm businesses financed by the fund have been a success, but overall farm income has increased in Kentucky at a time when income from tobacco production has declined.

"I think we're very lucky in Kentucky," Rogers said. "We've got a good track record and we've got the numbers to show (farm receipts) have improved."

Angela Blank, communications director for the ag policy office, said the last Kentucky policy to be selected for recognition by the Ash Institute was the Kentucky Education Reform Act.

Christina Marchand, program manager for outreach and evaluation at the Ash Institute, said once the field is narrowed to 18 programs in May, a selection committee will do site visits to evaluate the programs in detail.

"We'll meet with both advocates and opponents of the program, everyone who is involved with the program," Marchand said. The finalists will be invited to Cambridge to make short presentations to the selection committee before the final seven programs are selected in September, she said.

"All of our evaluators and experts evaluate on novelty and creativity," Marchand said. "They want to see tangible results" from the program, she said. The evaluation committee also looks at whether a program could be successfully adopted by other cities or states.

"I believe this year the (50 programs) were from 23 states and the federal government," Marchand said.

Rogers said officials from several states have met with his office about creating similar programs, and said Tennessee has started a program that closely resembles portions of the Kentucky program.

"We've had a lot of interest from tobacco-producing states in this program over the years," Rogers said.

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